First Presbyterian Church of Sarasota
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Ah – the church.

The one constant in my life. From the day I was born and immediately contracted pneumonia – and the pastor of a church on the block where my parents were living came to the hospital and prayed with them.

The church baptized me, nurtured me – taught me (more or less) confirmed me – introducing me to the worldwide enterprise and communion of saints which the church is.

The church followed me through college – like the Hound of Heaven – in the person of Mary Evans, white-hared quintessential "church lady" – who simply refused to let me escape her orbit of grace. "I'm praying for you, Johnny," she wrote on the little devotional magazine she sent every month for 4 years – and which I never read – but it was that "I'm praying for you" that I simply could not shake loose from.

The church took me under its care when I was doing everything I could think of to avoid the relentless, prevenient grace of God which kept coming at me through humble saints like Mrs. Evans – until I said without enthusiasm, "Well, - all right – I'll give this a shot" – and then decided, for whatever reason, that I was fit to be a minister – and ordained me, of all things.

The church married me – baptized each of my five children – stood by me as we celebrated the life and then commended to God's eternal mercy first my father, then my mother, and my wife's mother and father.

The church paid me a living wage – insured my health and my family's health., and along the way inspired me and irritated me to no end, embarrassed me, and occasionally made me proud, and showed me a vision of God's Kingdom on earth, along with a vision of irrelevance, triviality and silliness.

It has always been such a human project – as sinful as any individual – but more so because it is made of individuals – lots of them – thousands, millions, billions – of flawed sinful human beings.

Consequentially, it has always drawn the critique, cynicism, disdain of cultural despisers – who accuse the church, partly appropriately – of diluting the power and authority of the Gospel and the person of its founder, compromising, compromising in order to do well in the world.

Will Willimon quotes one wag who said: “I could believe in Jesus if he did not insist on dragging his leprous bride, the church, behind him.”

C.S. Lewis, in Screwtape Letters, famously has the devil advise his nephew on how best to dissuade a man from flirtation with Christianity and Jesus. “Call his attention to the church – to the obnoxious man in his pew – the disagreeable hypocrite sitting in front of him” i.e. the church itself calls in question the authority of religion.

And, every time I am sitting in yet another church meeting – droning on endlessly, aimlessly, deciding only to meet again to hash over the topic, whatever it is, a few hundred more times, I remember Will Willimon’s anecdote from his first church in Myrtle Beach. An evangelism campaign: teams of two sent into the community to knock on doors and invite people to church – a man listened to the invitation to attend East Side Methodist and said, “Oh, I don’t believe in organized religion.” The visitor responded, “Well, in that case you’ll love East Side Methodist. We’ve been at it for 50 years and we ain’t got it organized yet.”

So – some thoughts.

Does Christianity – does the Good News of the Gospel – really need the church?

The only news about the church is generally bad news, sometimes embarrassingly bad: clergy sexual abuse, irrelevant ethical rules and standards, diminishing numbers, a perplexing, relentless decline in raw numbers accompanied by an astonishing drop in public confidence.

So – first a bit of good news. Church is good for you.

T.M. Luhrmann is a Stanford anthropologist who studies the behavior and lives of people who attend and belong to churches. She reported her findings in an Op-Ed article in The New York Times, “The Benefits of Church” (April 20, 2013). “One of the most striking scientific discoveries about religion in recent years is that going to church weekly is good for you,” Professor Luhrmann observed that regular church attendance apparently boosts the immune system and decreases blood pressure and may add a few years to life. She confesses that the reasons for this phenomenon are not entirely clear and Luhrmann speculates that it has something to do with associating with people who “really do look out for one another, show up with dinner when friends are sick and sit to talk when they are unhappy.” A companion study of North Carolina Methodists found that frequent churchgoers had larger social networks, more contact with, more affection for, and more kinds of social support than their unchurched counterparts.

It is good to have a little good news, because the simple fact is that the Mainline Church is changing dramatically in front of our eyes. The ecclesiastical structures that evolved in the first two and one half centuries of American history, and a century or so in North America before that, are declining and diminishing and changing. The Mainline Church seems to be in a lot of trouble. “Mainline” is here defined as what historian Martin Marty calls the “Colonial Big Three”: Congregationalists (now, the United Church of Christ), Episcopalians, and Presbyterian, denominations that dominated in American culture from the 17th century, pre-Colonial days, through the first half of the 20th century. Methodists, Baptists, Disciples of Christ and some Lutheran churches are also included in the definition of Mainline and are sharing the experience and challenges facing the Colonial Big Three.

I came of age ecclesiastically when American churches were at the top of their game. We Presbyterians were almost 4 million strong and growing. We were proud of our history and place in American culture. We came along with the earliest settlers. There are Presbyterian churches that are a century older than the nation. When the Continental Congress declared independence, John Witherspoon, Presbyterian minister and president of the College of New Jersey (later Princeton University) was the only clergyperson member of the body and signatory to the Declaration. James Madison, whose thinking is reflected in the Constitution of the United States, was a student of Witherspoon. Reformed Christians are proud that the Founders’ political thinking was influenced, not only by Enlightenment philosophers like John Locke, but also by the radical political implications of Calvinism: that each individual, created in the image of a sovereign God, has value, dignity and political rights: that political authority originates, not hierarchically, with the King or Pope, but with the people: that power in both the ecclesiastical and political realms begins with the people who then, exercising their rights, confer it on those they choose to govern. The first national meeting of the Presbyterians, a General Assembly, convened in Philadelphia at the same time the new United States Congress was meeting to write a Constitution for the new republic. Presbyterians like to think that the political structure Congress came up with looks remarkably like the Presbyterian Church, with local, regional, and national governing bodies, elected by the people, with careful and intentional attention – imperfect to be sure, and always requiring protection – nevertheless intentional attention to the rights of the individual.

Because of their legacy of Reformation, and the God-given potential of the individual, Presbyterians founded educational institutions wherever they went, and so the first thing the pioneers did in the new world, after founding a church, was organize and build a school, a college, a theological seminary. American history is literally unimaginable without them. The vast majority of colleges and universities in the East began as church

institutions: Harvard, Yale, Princeton, and hundreds of fine liberal arts colleges - Agnes Scott, Carrol, Hampden-Sydney, McCalester, Stillman, Whitworth.

An important part of Mainline Protestant heritage is insistence on an educated ministry, requiring years of higher education. In pre-Revolutionary and Colonial days the source of most clergy was Europe - Great Britain, Germany, Scandinavia, and Scotland, and there simply weren't enough of them to keep up with the burgeoning frontier, in part because of an unwillingness to compromise on the educational requirement.

By the 1960s the Presbyterian Church in America was a growth industry. The Presbyterians – the church I know best and the church Martin Marty says is the quintessential Mainline American church - had consolidated our national organization and mission and education programs in a national headquarters, built a wonderful new office building to house Presbyterian and other denominational and ecumenical agencies at 475 Riverside Drive in Manhattan, just like a major multinational corporation. President Dwight Eisenhower, who was baptized a Presbyterian while in office, helped dedicate The Interchurch Center. Protestant Global and National Mission enterprises were thriving, new church developments were planted and funded and our highest officer, Stated Clerk Eugene Carson Blake was on the cover of Time Magazine.

And then something happened. What it was exactly has been and still is the subject of endless study and analysis. Membership growth gradually slowed and began to decline. Fewer new churches were started. Budgets began to shrink, and within the church members and leaders looked for someone to blame. Some thought that the church had become too worldly – too involved in society.

The Mainline Churches have always regarded involvement in the life of the world, local community, nation and world, as part of their mission priorities – independence, abolition, war, women, prohibition, labor, peace, justice. Just as John Calvin's Reformed Church was deeply involved in the social, economic and political life of 16th century Geneva, Switzerland – child labor laws, market place standards for weights and measures. The Churches have spoken to the major issues of the day in every age. In our time those issues included racial justice, poverty, war and peace, gender equality, sexuality and sexual orientation; that is to say issues that are hot, controversial. Some concluded that the church was too far ahead of its people; that in its commitment to be faithfully prophetic the church left many people behind. When church leaders were seen marching arm in arm with Martin Luther King, Jr., including our stated clerk, were arrested in a protest demonstration over racial discrimination at a Baltimore amusement park and he was photographed in his clerical collar being escorted into a paddy wagon, some people were deeply proud. I was. Others, including my

own father, were appalled. Some mark the numerical decline of the Presbyterian and mainline churches at the controversy generated by social action. I think that is an oversimplification. What happened to us is far more complex. In any event, our membership leveled off and began a slow decline that continues, from nearly 4 million to under 2 million today.

There are some obvious causes, and much of the same decline has happened to other denominations. One is demographic. Churches have always grown when members married and had more than two children. Sometime a few decades ago the birth rate in Mainline Churches dipped below that. Mainline churches were simply not replacing themselves by birth. Community change and economic and population decline in Presbyterian strongholds is certainly part of the problem. I grew up in a bustling railroad city of 85,000. There were 7 thriving Presbyterian Churches, enough for a Presbyterian basketball league. When railroads began their own radical change and decline, so did communities that depended on them for financial viability. The population of my hometown dropped to 50,000 and continues to decline. Four of the 7 Presbyterian churches have closed. The pattern is consistent. Once thriving churches watch as their neighborhoods change. Buildings age and deteriorate, average age of church members increases as young families move away. Today there are a handful of faithful members doing everything they can think of to raise enough money to repair the roof and replace the furnace.

Another reason is the very nature of Mainline churches. Mainline churches are orderly, representative organizations that pay a lot of attention to process – and that results in complex structures and multiplying committees to make sure every voice is heard. Compared to new mega churches that spring up overnight where there is strong community growth, the Mainline churches are simply not very nimble. Our very strengths exacerbate the dilemma. We cannot make needed changes without strategic planning processes that take years to complete. Willow Creek – in the Chicago suburbs – can call an entrepreneurial pastor, organize a church, rent space in a local school and open the doors for visitors – while the Presbytery of Chicago is forming a nominating committee to select members for the planning committee to do a feasibility and demographic study and hire a consultant. I mean no disrespect. It is – as they say – what it is.

There are exceptions. The Presbyterian Church is establishing 1001 new experimental “Worshipping Communities” that are simple, often lay-led, without costly buildings to maintain and that resemble, for all the world, the New Testament church. There are strong, vital congregations in center cities and suburbs that continue to serve faithfully and grow numerically. But in the meantime the Mainlines churches generally are caught in a kind of sociological and ecclesiastical perfect storm.

Churches are not privileged in American culture any longer. Not so very long ago Sunday morning was “our” time: a time poet Wallace Stevens describe as a “holy hush.” Today churches compete with soccer leagues, swimming meets, and shopping. On Michigan Avenue in Chicago – Bloomingdale’s, Macy’s, Tiffany’s, North Face, Victoria’s Secret – are open for business and busy 7 days a week.

Canadian theologian Douglas John Hall describes what is happening to churches in North America as “Disestablishment.” Churches have, in the past been part of the establishment, supported and virtually sponsored by custom, convention and sometimes even law every bit as substantially as the older established churches of Great Britain and Europe. All of that is gone now and Hall thinks it is a good thing. In The End of Christendom and the Future of Christianity Hall proposes that the church is free now to be the church authentically, without the ultimately artificial and unhealthy prop of the culture. Believers in the future will want to be part of the church for the right reasons, Hall predicts, and denominations, as we know them, may disappear altogether. The Presbyterian Church is in the midst of dramatic change. The old denominational corporate model, with corporate headquarters, field offices and staffs, mission planned and carried out top-down, funded by local entities that send money in to national headquarters to do mission globally and nationally on their behalf, has served well. But its time may be over. Congregations want to do mission on their own and are doing it admirably. Money that was once forwarded to the denominational headquarters now stays home and funds homeless shelters, food pantries and mission trips. Denominations will continue to oversee and coordinate global mission, but local congregations will want to be involved in a hands on way.

Phyllis Tickle proposes an intriguing metaphor for what is happening. In The Great Emergence she observes that every 500 years or so the church holds the equivalent of a giant rummage sale. Obsolete, out-of-date, worn out stuff is sold to make way for new, more efficient, better stuff. It has happened all the way back to antiquity. Every 500 years something big happens that changes everything: Jesus and the early church, the Papacy, the split between the Eastern church and Rome, the Reformation. Two things have happened at 500-year intervals. There is a split and an offshoot from the mainstream, experienced as a tragedy at the time, and a new reality emerges, a new, vigorous expression of the original idea. The second thing that happens is that the older, established institution renews, reforms, and reenergizes itself and becomes better and stronger. The two now move into the future in separate but parallel trajectories, with more integrity and energy and faithfulness: Roman Catholicism and Eastern Orthodoxy, Protestantism and Counter-Reformation Catholicism.

In the meantime it is very difficult not to hold on to the old structures for dear life. It is very difficult to let go and welcome new structures. With

10 million others we watch Downton Abbey. As that magical, mythical era in British history begins to crumble and shake and change, Lord Crawley has trouble imaging women with opnions. Carson looks suspiciously at the telephone…A metaphor for Mainline churches. What was, is no more. The congregation in which I was baptized, confirmed and ordained, a lively community of solid Presbyterians, has merged with an old First Church, once one of the largest Protestant churches in the city. The merged congregation has a new name and has a fraction of the size of the two former churches. I loved being part of the 1960s Presbyterian Church. But now it is time to watch and wait for what, in God's good time, will happen next, and to hasten to be part of it.

Recently, there is a quiet but hopeful current reexamination and reevaluation of the narrative of decline and despair about Mainline Christianity. Robert Putnam, whose sociological study, Bowling Alone, documented the decline of "social capital" in American culture, teamed up with Notre Dame professor David Campbell in a major analysis of current American attitudes about religion. American Grace: How Religion Divides and Unites Us not only documented the "none" phenomenon – the fastest growing religious category of American answers is "none" to pollsters' questions about religious preference – Putnam and Campbell also discovered that the churches' negative attitudes and teaching about women and sexuality is playing a major role in young adults leaving the church. Young adults abandoned the churches in droves because of judgmentalism and simple meanness they heard from conservative evangelical Christian leaders in the media.

So where does this leave us? Based on my own experience and observation of vital, thriving churches in urban centers and growing suburbs, I am convinced that a Christianity and Christian Church that faithfully reflects the compassion, graciousness, forgiveness, and acceptance of all, particularly those outside the conventional morality of the time, exhibited by its Lord Jesus Christ, will be compelling and healthy and viable. I believe a strong argument can be made for that kind of Church in the future, one that devotes its energy, intelligence, imagination and love to being a faithful Body of Christ in the world.

I believe the Church, in spite of what is happening at this moment in time, is still the way God plans to reconcile and redeem the world. The history of our faith is the story of God acting in human history, creating a people, a community. Israel's founding covenant reflected in the Decalogue is equally divided between proper relationship with God and proper relationship with neighbors, the community. Jesus called individuals to follow him and in the process formed them into a fellowship, a community. Before we jettison the idea of church we need to pay attention to how much time Jesus spent in the communal structure of his religion. And, the night before he died, he told the tiny fellowship of followers that they need one

another, that their unity, their community, communion would be how the world would come to know him. “Love one another,” he told them and it was just as essential as the ancient mandate to love God with heart, mind, soul, and strength.

Sometimes people wonder whether he really intended the institutional church. Did he really intend this – Vatican, Pope, Districts, Presbyteries, Dioceses? Jesus clearly intended to form and leave behind a community of followers who would, together, embody the good news of God’s love, as he did, would love one another so conspicuously and love the world with the same passion as he did, that people would see in them, and their life together something of the truth of God and God’s love.

My hope for the church, as it negotiates the choppy waters of change, is that we will remember our best and noblest traditions: that this liberal, republican democracy of ours is based on our values, our anthropology, our sense of moral responsibility, beginning with the innate dignity and worth of the individual.

I hope the church will hold tightly to the principal that faith always seeks understanding, that truth is in order to goodness, that the free pursuit of truth is part of what it means to love God with our minds, that faith need never fear, let alone oppose, science and rigorous intellectual inquiry. The world needs that reminder, desperately, at the moment.

The culture needs a religion that remembers its long relationship with the arts, in fact its historic inspiration of some of the most sublime art the human race has produced. And our culture, obsessed with individualism as a powerful political and economic dynamic, needs a religion that directs human attention away from self, away from the market-driven focus on me, my experience, my needs, my feelings, to an awareness of the mysterious, the ineffable, the wholly otherness of God.

And, the culture needs a religion that takes incarnation seriously, a church that seeks to love and serve the world unabashedly and unapologetically, a church driven not by the latest growth strategy but by the example of the One who loved the world so much he died for it.

A church like that will, I believe, be interesting and compelling, in its faithfulness, integrity, openness and love for the world.

Something is emerging and no one knows what it will look like. But there is growing consensus and evidence that it will be ecumenical, newly ecumenical, the emerging church will be willing to leave the safety of precious tradition, open to the truth others have discovered, other Christians: evangelical, liberal, Catholic, Protestant, Pentecostal, and other faith traditions: Jewish, Muslim, Buddhist, Hindu.

It will be open hearted and inclusive, willing to leave behind the safety of old exclusivisms, theological, social and moral. And it will be missional. It will attempt to be the body of Christ in the world, literally. Every congregation will begin, not with "What is our growth plan, our institutional survival strategy?" but with the simple question: "What does God want us to be doing in the world in the name of Jesus Christ?"

Robert Frost said that he had a lover's quarrel with the world. Anyone who spends much time in the church has a lover's quarrel with it. I do. I am as impatient as anyone with the church's slowness, its bureaucracy, its unfaithfulness. When I am discouraged about the whole enterprise I like to reread something Frederick Buechner once wrote about the Church.

"And finally when it comes to remembering things, we do well to keep in mind that the idea of becoming the Church wasn't their (the disciples) idea. It was Jesus' idea. It was Jesus who made them a Church… Maybe the best thing that could happen to the church would be for some great tidal wave of history to wash all that (the church paraphernalia) away—the church buildings tumbling, the church money all lost, the church bulletins blowing through the air like dead leaves, the differences between preachers and congregations all lost too. Then all we would have left would be each other and Christ, which was all there was in the first place." [The Clown in the Belfry: Writings on Faith and Fiction, Harper San Francisco, 1992, ps. 151, 158]

I remain high on the church, for all the reasons I have been trying to explain. For another thing, I'm high on the church because it is not ours, it's God's: it's not even our idea; it's God's idea. I'm hopeful because of something Jesus said to Peter one day – "You are Peter, the rock, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell will not prevail against it."

And, finally, I'm high on the church because of my own experience. Let me conclude with two anecdotes. The first is from my experience as Moderator of our General Assembly, representing the PCUSA to the global church. Moderators are sent wherever our global mission partners need to hear from us, need encouragement, need to know that American Presbyterians know about them, care about them, are praying for them. The shooting had just stopped in the Balkans, the ghastly massacres, ethnic cleansing, Sarajevo, Bosnian Muslims, Serbian Orthodox, Croatian Catholics had been at war for years. In Croatia there is a tiny, faithful Reformed Church. It has been there since the Reformation. Sue and I were sent to bring greetings from the PCUSA, to show concern and offer encouragement. We slept in a hotel in Osijek, with bullet holes in the façade, in a bed slightly larger than a standard twin bed. We visited Presbyterian mission volunteers in a hospital that cared for children who had limbs blown off by the thousands of land mines left behind. We helped serve food to hungry

Muslim refugees. I spoke with the RC Bishop, who told me how awful the Serbian Orthodox were. I spoke with Serbian Orthodox Christians who blamed everything on the Roman Catholics. I talked with Croatian Christians who patiently explained that Bosnian Muslims were shiftless, dirty, and had an obvious genetic deficit. And I met one of the most unforgettable characters I have ever encountered. Antol Bolog, a Serbian businessman, who had a conversion experience and decided to give his life to the healing and restoration of the battered people all round him. He went to work for the Croatian Reformed Church's Agape Project, funded in part by the PCUSA One Great Hour of Sharing. Agape had taken on the responsibility of helping rebuild Muslim villages destroyed by Serbian troops as they retreated. Antol's job was to assemble raw materials, beg, borrowed or steal and, as a last resort, pay for: the labor, volunteer and hired, and supervise the work.

On one occasion he was meeting with the Chief of a Muslim village that had been completely destroyed, leveled. They were looking at the plot plans laid out on a large table, examining each dwelling, each structure. When they came to the plans for a mosque, the Muslim leader expressed surprise. "Why," he asked Antol, "are you Christians going to build a Muslim mosque? You have been trying to kill us or convert us for a thousand years. Why are you rebuilding our house of worship?"

Antol responded, "We are going to rebuild your mosque because we follow a man who told a story about a traveler who was attacked by robbers, beaten and left for dead beside the road. A man came along, stopped, didn't ask about his religion, didn't try to convert him, just knelt by the side of the road, bound up the man's wounds and got him on his feet again.

That is why we Christians, the Christian Church, will rebuild your mosque.

A simple story: an isolated incident, but it continues to happen with enough frequency to give me hope for the church and confidence in the church's future.

Christianity needs the church: a community of people who know about the love of God in Jesus Christ and who strive together to be the Body of Christ in the world, to do the things he did, to say the things he said, to go to the places he went.

I was a parish pastor – a church pastor for fifty years and I have witnessed church being church, being the "Beloved Community," the Body of Christ in many way that make me humble and deeply, profoundly gratified. I know the healing, reconciling, redeeming power of a congregation of Presbyterian Christians.

I like to remember Glen Fenema when I find myself wondering about the future of the church.

Glen had AIDS. He grew up in and was a very active member of a church that was vocal about its disapproval of his sexual orientation. He found us through a friend, started attending and joined and literally threw himself into the life of the community that did not reject him because of who he was.

Glen volunteered for mission projects, signed up for a mission trip and never missed worship. His parents, life-long members of their family church, began to attend with him and eventually became members with him.

As his illness advanced, Glen could not always make it to worship on Sunday morning. We signed him up for the CD ministry that delivered the recorded service to his home.

Near the end he was in a hospice facility. On my last visit we talked with more depth and honesty than ever. We talked about his life, his faith. We talked about his dying.

I asked him, what was the hardest part. He told me the hardest part was at night, trying to fall asleep. He was so sick, and at night when all the guests had gone home, and the lights were down, and things were quiet – he was alone with his pain and illness – and the awareness that he was dying. “That’s very hard,” he said.

And then he brightened. “You know what I do?” he said. I turn on my CD player, and put on my headphones, and listen to the Sunday service at church. I must have a hundred of them. It settles me down. I relax - sometimes I fall asleep right away, during the prelude. I often fall asleep during your sermon (I’m not the only one to do that.”

“But almost every night I fall asleep like that, here in my bed, but also in my church.”

And that is why, in spite of everything to the contrary, I remain high on God’s church, the Church of Jesus Christ.

Does Christianity need the church? As a matter of fact: yes, yes it does.